



STEPHEN MCKENZIE



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The mature-age student

Carmel Hamilton has homework this week.

The 73-year-old has to read and analyse a chapter of philosopher Lou Marinoff's book *The Big Questions*.

"The chapter is all about pain being inevitable but suffering being optional. Some of it sounds a little bit deep, but it's not as frightening as it sounds," she says with a laugh.

Hamilton is a student at the City of Melbourne University of the Third Age (U3A), an international network that supports older people who want to take part in lifelong learning.

The U3A is run by volunteers, and membership is open to anyone over 50 who is retired or semi-retired.

Hamilton has been attending the university for eight years and has completed courses in current affairs, health and travel.

She is now studying philosophy, psychology and painting and is also a member of the university's monthly book group.

"It keeps you interested and going in life. I've always been really interested in people and what's going on in the world, and I also like to keep my mind stimulated."

But it's not just learning that motivates Hamilton to keep studying.

"I like the social aspect of it. When you stop meeting people you can get into a rut.

"I enjoy the people here because they are of a similar mind and want to keep their mind active. We all have a coffee after class."

Before enrolling at U3A Hamilton worked as a secretary and then as a personal care worker, but knee problems forced her to give up work.

The busy retiree wants to enrol in cinema and current affairs courses next semester. She says studying has allowed her to remain fit and healthy in more ways than one.

"It has kept my mind and body active. I always like to be learning something – just because you are getting older it doesn't mean you have lost interest in life."

The carer

Doreen Doolan could be forgiven for kicking back as she approaches her twilight years. Instead, the 73-year-old was more than willing to kick a soccer ball with her grandson Alex, 5, and create Play-Doh creatures with her three-year-old granddaughter Jade.

It's all in a day's work. Doolan has helped her daughter, Nicola Major, by looking after the kids after school since her eldest grandson, Patrick (now 13), was an infant. What began as a "convenience thing for Nicola, because she wanted to work" has developed into a permanent arrangement in which Doolan collects Patrick from high school and looks after the younger children while Major runs errands and husband Ross is at work.

"I'll do things around the place, fold the washing, try to be helpful," she explains, joking that she's the general dogsbody.

Doolan says the one thing her grandkids have taught her is patience. She manages to keep up with their liveliness due to her active lifestyle.

"I've always liked sport (Doolan still enjoys weekly walks and practises tai chi), so I've always been active – and you know how active kids are."

She admits that they do tire her out on occasion. "I couldn't do it full-time with the three of them, because I'm older and I haven't got the same energy like I did with Patrick.

"When I'm ever feeling overwhelmed, I think, 'If I wasn't doing this, what would I do?'"

"It's given Nicola and I a closer bond, and I get along well with her husband, too, which is nice."

Doolan agrees she has a different relationship with the family because she sees them so often.

"The little one (Jade) – if I'm away a day, I guarantee the next day I come over she'll be out of that gate and throw her arms around me. And they frequently ask me to stay over or stay for a meal, which is a good indication I'm probably seen as one of the family. It's really lovely."